Chapter VI

Cats Need Nine Lives

Food for Oskar was almost anything. It was what people ate, what cats and dogs ate, whatever he thought or knew we didn't want him to eat, and, only infrequently and under very special conditions, what Nature intended him to eat.

Here again he was untrue to his kind and more like a spoiled boy intent upon giving his parents a rough time.

You'd never know it from observing a family of geese training their young, but the goslings are born with an instinctive understanding of what is good for them and what isn't. The two conspicuous exceptions are bright objects, such as ~~nails,~~ glass, ~~bits of wire and similar objects,~~ and certain molds. The affinity for ~~foreign~~ strange and dangerous objects that are, by no stretch of any creature's imagination, edible is not unique with geese. I have seen collections of the strangest assortments of exotic shapes and colors removed from the gizzards of chickens at a poultry-dressing plant. ~~This collection~~ There included a fairly large assortment of unexploded bullets, imitation pearls, nails, screws, nuts, bolts, wires, shards of glass and pottery, things so totally foreign to the range of organic substances that nourish fowl as to boggle the imagination. That the fowl survive this depraved appetite is surprising, almost as surprising as the failure of the

gizzard-knife ever to detonate the bullets.

Cattle suffer the same aberration, but with them it is dignified with a name, "Hardware disease". Veterinarians have told me of removing as many as four dozen extraordinary foreign and metallic substances from the rumen of a single animal. The animal lives; but eventually the sharp edges puncture the walls of the rumen. The animal fails and ultimately dies.

We once had a capon who, in some strange manner, found a corrugated, plated nail, designed for the installation of cement-asbestos-board shingles. We never had such shingles, so the origin of the long, thin nail is a mystery. Before the nail had had time to seriously diminish his good fleshing, that capon was prepared for the oven. Upon evisceration, his normally round gizzard was revealed to have a quite remarkable pointed appendage, a projection that doubled its size and around which the distended tissue glistened with its tautness. We opened the gizzard and found that the nail had almost completely penetrated the wall, impelled by the normal movements of that muscle as though by repeated light taps of a hammer. The tissue near the point of the nail was toughening, callousing over. Until then I'd never known such nails were plated and were an attractive golden shade under the plating. The gizzard acids had dissolved the plating and revealed the basic metal.

An invention of beautiful simplicity protects cattle from many of the effects of hardware disease, but there seems to be no prospect of its adaptation to geese. A permanent magnet of great power is manufactured in the shape of a lozenge and is inserted far into the back of the cow's throat, into which a man's arm may seem almost

completely to disappear. The magnet remains in the rumen and attracts to it all the magnetic objects a cow manages to find on even the best-kept and scientifically managed farms.

The rumen is quite a large organ, as it must be to accommodate the vast quantities of hay and grass the cow requires. Alas, in even a large goose the gizzard is a small muscle, compactly designed by an efficient nature who could not anticipate all future ~~possibilities~~ CONTINGENCIES while developing the goose. She allowed no space for magnets and the magnetic weapons of destruction they attract.

Normally, geese are sensible creatures, but against "hardware disease" they seem to have no defenses. The attractiveness of these strange and fatal objects is not easy to understand, for often they are inconspicuous and without glitter, old and rusty. Geese are also suckers for a few kinds of molds which ultimately destroy their sense of balance and lead to their deaths. Old farmers call this "mud fever", for it seems to be associated with muddy or unclean water.

There are some molds that seem to be quite beneficial to geese, to work almost like antibiotics in improving health. These are found in certain rotting stumps and fallen trees. We once laid a form of locust tree-trunks averaging about five inches in diameter along the side of a hill to prevent erosion and to hold a path built across the face of the hill. Locust is one of those woods that resist rot longest. I have removed locust fenceposts, long the favorite of farmers in our area, from the earth in which they have been imbedded for 20 years and found some of them were almost perfect; if anything, still more durable than unseasoned posts.

Those locusts laid to retain the earth lasted about five years. ~~At the~~

At the end of that time, fortunately, the earth had settled and firmed itself, for the locust tree-trunks had been entirely consumed by the geese.

Geese suffering from mud fever can be saved by suspending them in a sling, in such a fashion that gravity keeps them upright while their long necks can still reach clean water and soft or liquid foods. Unless they are securely fastened into such hammocks, which we made from old burlap feed sacks, the geese flop over and remain on their backs with their feet in the air. They go through the motions of walking, without understanding they are on their backs and not on their feet. Eventually, they die of starvation if not from the toxicity of the mold.

(SPACE)

Once we reconciled ourselves to his ungoosely preferences, feeding Oskar was anything but a problem, as long as the earth upon which he roamed was free of attractive nuisances. If it was anything any other creature, human, animal or avian, found edible, it was for Oskar, especially if he could steal it or pretend to steal it, and as long as it wasn't something he was supposed to like.

Not that he didn't know what he was supposed to eat and relish; he did. When young, he found the balled pieces of pumpernickel to his liking; also, the crumbled poultry food. He raced after the blades of grass and clover that we plucked from the as yet cold and inhospitable earth as they stretched hopefully toward the not yet warm enough sun. He delighted in cocking first one eye, then the other, at the enticing green as we twirled it between thumb and forefinger, giving it an eccentric, elliptical pattern as it spun before his eyes. He knew at birth that grass and clover were good for him, and tasty, although he had no actual mother to show him.

He preferred the clover, as he should have, for it contains more valuable food elements, but I suspect that it was not nutritional instinct but his delight in the unpredictable patterns made by the motion of the leaves as they rotated before him. It was great sport for Oskar the baby gosling to suddenly strike forward with his head, grasp a leaf of the clover in his bill, and brace his legs and pull against the stem until the leaf separated and it was incontestably his. A few quick jerks of the head, the leaf was gone and he was back for more.

No, it wasn't that Oskar didn't know what a goose was supposed to like. He just had his own ideas about what he wanted. If it wasn't offered, he waited for it and usually got it, if in no other way, from the animals when they were fed.

By the time he was two weeks old, Oskar had, so to speak, planted his webbed feet so firmly under the cats' table there was no room for the cats. Catfood, as we had earlier seen, is better suited to the rapid growth of goslings than the most scientifically compounded and balanced diets. Lil fed the cats canned fish and reconstituted powdered milk, fortified with cod-liver oil. Its protein content was higher than recommended for geese, and it was a paste, more on the liquid side. Nature gave Oskar teeth, serrated edges on both the upper and lower mandible, for biting off the foods for which she thought him best adapted and best for him. But Oskar had little concern with Nature's great design. He had his own. Perversity seemed to be the science which controlled his nutritiional determinations. If we intended and designed ~~it~~ food for another species - any other species - he decided it was for him and him alone. By his very

manner he proclaimed that if it was good for him it was too good for cats. Before his feathers had begun to show, when his rapidly growing body was still covered with the fine down with which he had been born, when by all the rules of nature he was completely without defenses, he was chasing the cats away from their own meals.

"I may have no defenses, but I sure am offensive," seemed to be his attitude. Of course, he was able to get away with it only because the cats had good manners and infinite patience and he was a boor they elected to tolerate, an ill-mannered, pugnacious aggressive upstart with more nerve than brains. At that early age, any of the cats could have dispatched him to goose heaven with such speed Oskar wouldn't have known he was taking a trip until he arrived. As though they had talked it over and reached a decision, all decided to suffer him. If they thought he'd outgrow his outrageous behavior, they could not have been more wrong. And by the time their almost boundless patience ran out, it was too late. They could do nothing about it.

First, the cats made the mistake of trusting him. Oskar was as completely unworthy of trust as any companion can possibly be. When their backs were toward him and their minds at peace; when they were deep in pleasant dreams; and when he ~~first~~ decided their food was his - on the primitive basis of he saw it and he wanted it, therefore, it was his alone - he'd nip their unsuspecting tails. Even a very young goose can take a ~~very~~ real good nip because of the sharpness of the serrations edging his bill. They are quite sharp, and because they extend in unbroken rows, like closely planted needles, completely around both mandibles, his aim didn't have to be good. He needed only to latch onto the tail with any part of his bill, close it, and the

cats were in pain. Because this is an instinctive act among all geese (if not a normal application of it), it is not possible to say with certainty that the Dybbuk had taken possession of him. It is, however, fairly certain that, were the Devil in control, Oskar's instinct and actions could not have been more to his liking.

When the cats were facing him, whether asleep or awake, Oskar found their whiskers a choice and unsuspecting target. Because of the freedom their normal peacefulness and trust gave him, he could unabashedly walk up to them, in no way revealing his base intent, lash out quick as a striking snake with that armored beak, snap his head back like a cowboy cracking a bullwhip, bringing with it a plucked-out whisker and eliciting the most horrendous shrieks from the hurt and astonished cats. The pulling of whiskers from their faces was foreign to their previous experience, hence, startling in addition to being quite painful. Yet they never retaliated, for their good sense told them this was an infant, easily hurt or destroyed. If they hoped he would grow out of it, as their kittens lost most of their playfulness as they grew up, the cats were wrong, more completely wrong than they ever were about anything else. "Junior" was the sole exception. Having lost an eye to a rat in an unwary moment, she never relaxed in Oskar's presence and departed on his approach.

"Big Ears", the tomcat, was boss of the cat family. He was in one way or another related to all the cats - father, grandfather, brother, uncle or cousin - and he never dreamed anything would challenge his authority. He was the most surprised of the felines. When Oskar began to cast his eye on the catfood, we anticipated his intent. We could almost see the little gears grinding away in his mean little

head as his eyes told him the cats were engaged in eating. Immediately Lil began feeding Oskar at the same time, placing his food on little boards he could not upset by walking on them. (If at all possible, he always walked over or through food before eating it.) But he would have none of it - he wanted, demanded, and by straightforward tyranny, got the cats' food! He soon had the tomcat so terrified that he fled on Oskar's approach. Several times we saw the tom go straight up two feet in the air under Oskar's unprovoked and unpunished tortures.

(Picture)

Strangest of the cat episodes was what befell Spotsy, whose complete and exotic name is "Spotnik". Her brother had been the most attentive of all the kittens we had ever had, and that's hundreds of them. Wherever my wife went he went, as close beside her foot as his little body could be manipulated. Inadvertently, he was often walked on. He'd howl at the top of his little voice, but my wife must have been more pained, for he never deviated from the practice. The obvious name for him, in the era of the satellites, was "Sputnik", Russian for companion. This his sister, black save for a single white mark at her throat, on impulse and in the absence of a better name - when you named hundreds, the choices became fewer and the imagination more taxed - became "Spotnik", contracted to Spotsy.

Of all the cats we have ever had, she was most attached to my wife and my wife to her, even though a strong reciprocal bond always existed between my wife and all the cats. In some manner, Spotsy became possessed of the notion she was my wife's mother. Early each morning when I left the house to tend the chickens, Spotsy was waiting

at the door. In the colder months, this was well before daylight, but Spotsy was always there. Except, that is, during the periods of her romances and for a two- to three-week interval afterssshe became aware of the young growing within her, when, as though understanding the coming obligations of the imminent future, she took a vacation in the woods.

Once in the house, Spotsy went straight to our bed, which she always pprang upon with the softness and delicacy one associates with the silent, padded walk of her kind. Invariably, she reached the bed as close as possible to the footboard on my wife's side, and in each and every instance, she immediately settled down alongside my wife's feet, which she knew to be cold as certainly as though it had been her naked back rather than mine which they had found and chilled during the night.

Spotsy then remained immobile. She forewent the great pleasure common to all cats upon entering a house, the joy of a careful bath. Not so much as a whisker moved until my wife awakened. Then Spotsy walked directly up her body, coming to rest as close to her face as possible, and hugged her left arm with all four legs before settling down to the sheer pleasure of just plain togetherness. As the time for the arrival of her real young grew closer, Spotsy usually had a mouse with her, clearly intending to feed it to her supposed child. Before I understood her reasoning, she several times got onto the bed with her goodies.

This overly maternal cat, while seized with the strange but fixed notion that my wife was her daughter, nonetheless always knew and recognized her responsibilities to her natural children, thus com-

plicating our lives still further. As all who have ever prized cats and allowed them unfettered freedom know, as often as Nature permits, they come into heat and conceive. Their period of gestation is unfortunately short, as is the required duration of lactation, at the end of which they busily return to the oestrus condition, which again means a return of the nocturnal caterwauling and howling fights as the males of all descriptions, as well as those defying any description, gather from miles around, attracted by the scent that carries so far to their attentive and perceptive nostrils and yet is undetected by humans until too late for precautionary steps. In this manner, our cat population has exploded to as many as 28 adults simultaneously.

Knowing, as do all of Nature's own, of the imminence of her time, Spotsy sought to arrange for the proper discharge of her obligations and responsibilities to both of her families, to the "daughter" twenty times her size and to those she knew would soon arrive from their stirring and kicking within her. The solution was a simple and obvious one to the cat, but one not to our liking. As she conceived her problems and their solution, arranging for the arrival of her new family on the sofa solved everything. After her first presentation of this sort, we were always on guard against her biennial efforts to repeat it.

She was nothing if not persistent. Knowing much better than we when things were going to happen, she made a great and noisy nuisance of herself, clamoring for entry until, for the sake of peace, she was permitted in the house. Then, when her bulk had us on the alert, it was a constant necessity to watch her closely, even almost constantly when she was very quiet, so that, when it was too late for her to dare

a change of venue, we could deposit her in a creche of our selection.

A decent regard for her feelings required that it be near the house, for otherwise her frustrations might precipitate the need for a feline psychiatrist. By now she is reconciled to lying in in the closest of our outbuildings, where a bushel basket lined with soft and absorbent peatmoss is always available and gradually has become acceptable to her. Once her babies are dry, she has but a hundred feet to assure herself of the welfare of the human part of her family, to whom she is then anxious to impart all of the details of her delivery and production, which she accomplishes with a mixture of the appropriate meows and rubbing against Lil's legs with her face turned upward. Her ability to communicate is almost human. Lil swears she understands what Spotsy is saying, and I cannot dispute her.

Over all of her body, Spotsy was solid black except for two markings. High on her breast was a symmetrical small white spot, the mark that figured in her name. And in each set of black whiskers which fanned out from both sides of her nose, Spotsy had a single and very conspicuous white one.

For Oskar, these two white whiskers were natural targets. The first time he was near enough to her face to seize one, he did. Not long thereafter, he got the second. An all-wise Nature replaced them with black ones, if, indeed, they were replaced at all, and Spotsy thereafter was no more attractive a target or more vulnerable than any of the other cats, which was still pretty vulnerable.

Less than a week after he first tasted the catfood, none of our dozen cats no longer nursing would go near it. They were too afraid of him. When he finished eating, he splashed it around with

his feet and tossed it from his bill, which he dipped into it and then twirled like a strutting cheerleader manipulating a baton. The catfood was all over everything. By the time Oskar tired of the sport, there was little left for the cats.

"Another pan ought to do it," my wife announced after a proper study of the situation.

So she placed but a little of the food in the first pan, to which Oskar promptly hied himself, and poured the remainder into another pan some distance away. This stratagem worked until Oskar saw cats eating while he was eating.

"Lese majeste!" his immature honk seemed to proclaim, and in as much of a flash as can be achieved with waddles, he was after the cat's pan. Naturally, the cats fled. Only a few of them dared circle around to what my wife had intended as Oskar's pan.

"Something must be done," my wife announced one day, expecting me to be the magician with a formula. Knowing her attachment to the cats was undiminished by her affection for the rascally Oskar, I knew I had to devise some method of permitting the cats to eat in peace.

Like everything involving Oskar, it worked out by doing and figuring things backwards.